



# Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context

*Studies in Honor of  
Irene J. Winter by Her Students*

*Edited by*  
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# ASSYRIAN ROYAL MONUMENTS ON THE PERIPHERY: RITUAL AND THE MAKING OF IMPERIAL SPACE

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During the early first millennium BCE, the Neo-Assyrian state grew to become the most far-reaching and militarily powerful entity in the ancient Near East. In their quest for territory, Assyrian kings campaigned from the heartland of Assyria to outlying regions, creating a unified realm that lasted for approximately three centuries. Much of what we know of these conquests comes from texts and images from the center of this realm, the Assyrian capital cities. Here, however, I would like to discuss another group of Assyrian monuments not in the center, but in the peripheries of the expanding empire.<sup>1</sup> These monuments were erected while on military campaign, and consisted of freestanding stone stelae and rock reliefs (figures 1, 2). They were produced by every major Neo-Assyrian king from Ashurnasirpal II in the ninth century to Ashurbanipal in the seventh, were carved in various types of locations, and were distributed over a wide geographical area. Approximately fifty of these monuments still survive today, and nearly as many undiscovered monuments are mentioned in royal texts.

Because these monuments were erected on military campaigns, it might make sense to interpret them as political in aim. If one looks more closely at their larger context, however, one begins to see another possible purpose and message. It is the goal of this paper to begin to foreground the relationship of these monuments to ritual activity. Many, if not all of these royal stelae and rock reliefs were the recipient of ritual activity, including elaborate ceremony and sacrifice. As such, they seem to have been sacred objects, or objects commemorating sacred acts. Once we begin to view the monuments

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the foresight and generosity of my mentor, Irene Winter, under whose tutelage this study was originally developed as a Ph.D. dissertation (Shafer 1998). I shall always be indebted to and inspired by Irene for her powerful wisdom and presence.

this way, the Assyrian campaigns themselves, as well as the making of Assyrian art in general, takes on a new identity. The present study outlines our evidence for these rituals and will show how, through the simultaneous actions of image-making and ritual performance, Assyrian kings not only marked territorial conquest in a literal way, but also engaged a highly-charged symbolic field of space, tradition and legitimacy.

### *Geographical Distribution*

In order to understand fully the symbolic power of these royal monuments in Assyria's peripheral zones, it is first necessary to discern the patterns in their spatial distribution and related function. Using both the extant monuments as well as ancient textual references to others that did not survive, we are able to plot their original locations, and in so doing, are able to understand the deliberate ways in which they were crafted and placed into the landscape.<sup>2</sup>

When we survey the monuments in chronological order, the nature and evolution of their purpose becomes clear. In the ninth century, during the early period of the Assyrian territorial consolidation, the peripheral monuments assumed their paradigmatic function, steadily marking outlying territories as they were added to Assyria's borders. During the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE), the monuments mostly marked endpoints of campaigns or secure zones of political transition, and as such, together marked the perimeters of the king's realm as a whole. It is also during his reign that these monuments began to engage an earlier, apparently established tradition of revisiting sites previously marked by earlier kings.<sup>3</sup>

Using the conquests of his father as a base, Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE) effected a much more ambitious military program, extending Assyria's borders and erecting a record number of monuments far a field. In tandem with the speed of his territorial expansion,

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<sup>2</sup> Individual textual sources—which include palace historical inscriptions of both the annalistic and display types as well as the inscriptions on the peripheral monuments themselves—are far too numerous to list here (see Shafer 1998, Appendix A).

<sup>3</sup> Ashurnasirpal II is said to have visited and marked the “source of the Subnat River,” where his predecessors Tiglath-Pileser I and Tukulti-Ninurta II also erected monuments (Grayson 1991, 200-201).

Shalmaneser III's monuments were erected more frequently, not only marking important military victories, but also delineating entire geographical regions. Like his father, Shalmaneser III also adopted the practice of revisiting and remarking sites containing monuments of his predecessors. Finally in the ninth century, although Shamshi-Adad V's reign was relatively short and military victories few, he also appears to have used royal monuments to mark his most notable territorial expansions beyond those of his predecessors.

In contrast to the significant political gains of the ninth century, the beginning of the eighth century marked a degree of political decentralization in Assyria. While Adad-nirari III (810-783 BCE) may have intended to use the royal monument in the same fashion as his predecessors, it was the increasingly powerful provincial administrators who began to use the monuments for their own purposes instead. Nevertheless, the most fundamental characteristic of the Assyrian monument type—territorial delineation—now played itself out on a much smaller scale, marking off administrative boundaries within the Assyrian heartland.

Despite the political discontinuity of the early eighth century, the successful reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BCE) heralded an upsurge in the production of royal monuments on the periphery. His monuments reflect a clear knowledge of Assyria's previous territorial boundaries, thus marking only those victories that resulted in significant territorial expansions beyond those of the ninth century. During the reign of Sargon II (721-705 BCE), the monuments were used in a similar fashion, marking further territorial expansions. In addition, during Sargon's reign the function of the monument began to expand to include political diplomacy as well.

This trend toward broadening the function of the royal monuments saw its fullest expression in the seventh century, especially during the reign of Sennacherib (704-681 BCE), who, although using monuments to mark military victories, also explored their potential to commemorate construction projects closer to home. As for Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE), during his reign monuments seem to have become a tool for political negotiations among Assyria's allies. Finally, in the time of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BCE), peripheral monuments remained a powerful royal symbol, but like the slowly-weakening empire, their production appears to have eventually halted.

Thus, when we plot the locations of the monuments in relation to historical events, clear patterns in geographical distribution and political function emerge. First of all, we see that the monuments consistently marked important culminating or transitional points in the campaigns. In many cases, their locations corresponded to what were viewed as the most important outlying regions or borders of the Assyrian realm. Moreover, when we compare reigns, we see that each king was aware of his predecessors' monuments, and felt the desire or political necessity to engage that tradition by placing monuments in the very same locations. In addition, as the tradition matured, Assyrian kings created increasingly subtle and sophisticated variations, not only in their placement, but also in their intended message and political function. Over the three centuries of their production, therefore, the royal peripheral monuments acted as a consistent and effective tool for creating a powerful Assyrian presence on the periphery.

### *Iconography*

The patterns in spatial distribution and dynastic continuity are further reinforced by the singular, very consistent form of the Assyrian monuments themselves. The surviving monuments consist of both rock reliefs and stelae, and all have several important features: a similar image of the Assyrian king, divine emblems, and an Akkadian annalistic inscription (figures 1, 2). For the purposes of this study, I will examine the monument image that, even for the Assyrians, seems to have been the monument's most salient characteristic. Long overlooked because of its deceptively accessible iconography, the monument's standardized image can be shown to reflect a strong cultural investment and self-consciousness about its message, namely, that the central agent in Assyria's growth and power is the king himself.

One of the monument's most distinctive characteristics is its deliberate adherence, despite its location on the empire's periphery, to the central palace idiom of royal representation. As a result, we are able to examine the image in relation to well-established domains of visual elaboration and convention, which in turn allows us to arrive at a more precise understanding of the image and its referents. Not just an image of the Assyrian king, but of the complex notion of "kingship," as the Assyrian term *šalam šarrūtija* ("image of my kingship") implies,

the peripheral monument image intersects with multiple systems of royal visual communication. What results is a multi-layered image of the ideal aspects and attributes of Assyrian kingship.

One way in which the peripheral monument communicates the notion of ideal Assyrian kingship is through its rendering of the king's physical attributes. Adhering to well-established palace convention, although relatively lifelike, the image is not a "portrait" in the modern sense of representing individual likeness, but engages a highly-charged set of codes for representing the multiple aspects of Assyrian "kingship" in the broadest sense of the term.<sup>4</sup> Shown only in profile or three-quarter view, the figure of the king never engages the viewer directly, but instead occupies a separate plane, displaying at a respectful distance a full array of notable attributes. The king's physical fitness to rule and potential for action are indicated by his upright and alert stance, detailed musculature, and grounded, yet forward-moving feet. In addition, other details such as the king's robe, divine emblem necklace, and conical *polos* crown are coded for specific action, locating him immediately in his cultic role as high priest.<sup>5</sup>

While these individual features locate the king in a general cultic guise, his arm gesture is coded in a more specific way. Most distinct is his raised right arm, wherein his hand-gesture shows the forefinger extended as though pointing. This gesture has been shown to have been made during prayer and seems to express the king's humility before the gods.<sup>6</sup> More important, in the visual realm, the gesture usually appears in scenes of the king addressing one or more full-figured images of deities, as examples from seal impressions and palace frescoes indicate.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore probable that on the peripheral monuments, the king's gesture is meant to reference such a scene. But here, of course, the full-scale divine recipients of his gesture do not

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<sup>4</sup> The discussion of "portraiture" in the ancient world has largely been Greco-centric in nature, but in Irene Winter's study of images of the Mesopotamian ruler Gudea (1989), and of the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin (1996), she has begun to decipher the complex aspects of royal attributes in the ancient world. More recently, she elaborated upon this discussion for the Neo-Assyrian period (1997).

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the royal robe and costume types see Magen 1986.

<sup>6</sup> The nature and meaning of this gesture in the Neo-Assyrian period is not adequately documented in the ancient sources, but Magen's reconstruction of the evidence (1986, 45-54) strongly points to this interpretation. Whether the deity represents a cult statue or simply an abstract idea, the king's gesture clearly indicates his capacity for piety.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in the wall painting from Residence K at Khorsabad, which depicts Sargon II and the crown prince before the god Ashur (Loud 1938, pl. 89).



appear. Instead, the peripheral monument's frame seems to isolate the king's figure, and so what remains is not an image of the king's action toward any particular deity, but an abstracted image of pious action alone.

It is this kind of iconographical reconfiguration that characterizes a second level of meaning in the peripheral monuments, namely, the way in which they embody and affirm the royal prerogative to make established iconographies into new images. In order to understand this second layer of meaning, it is helpful to look further into the peripheral monument iconography. Let us return to the most "active" iconographical element of the king's figure, his raised right hand. As noted above, this gesture is usually used to show the king's reverence or piety toward a divine figure, whose representation, in this case, is missing. Instead, in the field above the king's head, are divine emblems. While for the casual viewer the king might seem to be pointing toward the emblems, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the king focuses and points directly ahead, effectively unaware of the emblems above. Although the exact origin of such representations of divine emblems is unclear, they often appear in scenes of military parade.<sup>8</sup> More important than what this reveals about iconographic sources, however, is the fact that our peripheral monument image is a new one, comprising elements of several distinct visual traditions. In the process of uniquely re-combining such traditions, the Assyrian king himself, it seems, assumes the role of creator.

While this image on the peripheral monument is unique, comparing it to a specific body of images from the Assyrian center does help us to understand its symbolic message further. In many ways, the image on slab B-23 of Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace throneroom (figure 3), provides the best parallel for our peripheral monument image.<sup>9</sup> This scene is simple compositionally, depicting four figures symmetrically arranged around a central stylized tree, above which floats an anthropomorphic winged disk, probably representing the state god of Assyria, Ashur. Closest to the tree and deity stand two nearly mirror-images of the Assyrian king wearing a fringed robe and gesturing in a now-familiar manner with a pointed finger. Behind the figures of the

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<sup>8</sup> For example, on the so-called Broken Obelisk of Ashur-bel-kala, from Nineveh (Börker-Klähn 1982, fig. 131).

<sup>9</sup> This image also appears in the throneroom of the Northwest Palace on slab B-13.

king, and thus framing the entire scene, are two winged male deities with horned crowns (*apkallus*) carrying in the left hand a pail, and in the raised right hand an oval object similar to a pinecone. While the exact purpose of their gestures cannot be certainly determined, it seems that they are performing some kind of operation on the tree, perhaps pollination.

Although placed prominently in Ashurnasirpal II's throneroom, since no direct mention of this scene is made in Assyrian texts, the meaning of the tree scene remains the subject of debate.<sup>10</sup> Specific interpretations vary, but it seems most likely that the image symbolically characterizes the king's relationship with the divine world, and that the stylized tree represents not only the concept of abundance, but more specifically, the land of Assyria and its potential for territorial growth.<sup>11</sup> That the growth of the tree, or Assyria, was thought to be divinely generated is suggested in glyptic images, wherein the winged disk's long pendant tassels encircle the tree.<sup>12</sup> That the king was thought to be the primary earthly agent in this divine growth, however, is suggested in slab B-23, not only by Ashur's gestural acknowledgement of the king, but also by the king's position in the composition, whereby he too becomes the recipient of the *apkallus*' actions.

With this direct relationship in mind, how can B-23 be used to complement our understanding of the peripheral monument image? One important parallel is the reduplication of the king's figure in both right and left profile views. In B-23, the two royal figures alternate on either side of the central tree. Likewise, the royal figures on peripheral monuments alternate too, from right to left profile. More specifically, of those monuments still surviving, roughly half depict the king facing right, and half facing left. That such alternation was not simply coincidence, but was an integral feature of the monument type in general, is graphically represented by the monuments of Sennacherib—such as the rock reliefs at Cudi Dag and the stelae from Nineveh—where alternating royal figures were used at the same site (Börker-Klähn 1982, figs. 180-184, figs. 203-204).

<sup>10</sup> For a summary of theories identifying the figures and their actions, see Porter 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Irene Winter (1983) makes this particularly compelling symbolic argument.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, the ninth-century cylinder seal from Sherif Khan (Collon 1987, fig. 341).



In order to understand the alternation and reduplication of the king's image on peripheral monuments, however, it is necessary to re-examine slab B-23. There, it is possible that one function of the reduplication was to describe movement. This is suggested by the abovementioned interpretation of the scene as depicting a pollination ritual performed by the *apkallus* and the king upon the tree (Porter 1993). If so, the reduplicated figure of the king could represent his successive movements to encircle the tree. If we agree that the tree symbolically represents the collective Assyrian lands, the peripheral monuments might be said to represent the king's movements around the territories of his realm. With these readings of B-23 in mind, the reduplicated peripheral monument images erected at various locations in the Assyrian landscape appear to embody the literal meanings of both movement within, as well as imposition of order upon the land of Assyria itself.

To summarize, a comparison with images in the Assyrian center reveals that peripheral monuments were directly linked with ideas about the king's relationship to Assyria's territorial growth. The symbolic complexity of the Assyrian royal image is probably not unique to monuments on the periphery, however, but may also play a role in the larger body of images that make up Assyrian palace visual culture as a whole.<sup>13</sup> It is precisely because of their paradigmatic nature, however, that monuments on the periphery becomes so valuable a tool for expanding our understanding of ancient Assyria. This becomes especially apparent when we step away, for a moment, from the monuments themselves, and look instead at the way they are described in both inscriptions and visual representations. Here, the monuments are shown to have been the focus of an elaborate set of rituals performed, in part, by the king himself. On the basis of this evidence, these images become much more than simply markers of territorial conquest; instead, they now become a window onto a complex Assyrian perceptual reality, where the symbolic and the real become one.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see individual studies by Marcus 1987; Russell 1991.

*Assyrian Ritual Revealed*

As a background to our discussion of ritual activity, it is first important to clarify an important relationship between monument accessibility and function. Since the Assyrian process of military expansion often involved the conquest of urban centers, a large portion of the peripheral monuments were stelae erected in enemy cities, displayed prominently in the city gate or outer defensive system.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the urban sites, however, many monuments were also carved into the landscape itself, in more remote and often inaccessible regions.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the urban contexts where siting may reflect the desire for political visibility, the rural locations may reflect a move to control and protect the land and its resources.

While the remote rural monuments were probably hidden even from enemy populations, it seems that in many cases, because of the symbolic nature of their locations, the monuments were well-known to the Assyrians, and furthermore, that they functioned as important loci of Assyrian ceremony and ritual. The most vivid example of such a site is what the Assyrians called the “source of the Tigris River,” today called the Tigris Tunnel, located on the Birklineçay, a tributary of the Tigris River near the modern village of Lice in southeastern Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Shalmaneser III visited the site on two separate occasions, and each time carved images and inscriptions marking two portions of the site: a lower tunnel, through which the river flows, and an upper cave. Neither of the locations is easily accessible, requiring the visitor to either wade through the river or to climb. More to the point, neither the upper nor the lower monuments are visible to the naked eye from a distance, indicating that only those with prior knowledge of their locations would be likely to visit them.

Just as the Tigris Tunnel seems remote for the modern visitor, so too did it seem for the Assyrians, as is captured in a visual representation of the site on the upper and lower friezes of Band X of Shalmaneser III’s Balawat Gates (figure 4) (King 1915, 30-31, pls. LVIII-LIX).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Sargon II erected a stele in the city gate of the city of Tikrakkî, which is depicted in Room 2 of his palace at Khorsabad (Albenda 1986, pl. 120).

<sup>15</sup> The rock carving at Uzunoglan-tepe, attributed to Shalmaneser III, is a good example of how remote and difficult to access such monuments can sometimes be (Tasyürek 1975).

<sup>16</sup> For a complete bibliography, see Börker-Klähn 1982, 187-188.

Here, we see the simultaneous carving of two royal monuments, one at the upper cave and one at the lower tunnel. The upper frieze of Band X focuses on the concealment of the monument in the upper cave, depicting a semi-circular enclosure surrounded by the rocky landscape of its remote setting. Framed by the curvature of the cave walls, two solitary craftsmen—shown to be deep in the cave by their diminished scale—carve an almost imperceptible image and/or text into the darkness. The only witness to the carving is a single Assyrian official with his attendant, who both stand outside the cave on a small footbridge, gesturing toward the cave interior. At the end of the frieze, the vast and remote mountainous terrain fills the entire height of the image, interrupted only by a solitary figure and the tiny outline of a mountain fortress in the distance.

Just below this scene in the lower frieze of Band X is a similar scene, which emphasizes both the difficulties of the mountainous terrain and the raging force of the river. On a rocky wall outside the tunnel, two Assyrian craftsmen carve an image of the Assyrian king. Water is flowing profusely from the tunnel, and in order to gain enough height above the river to carve the relief, the men must stand on a stone block placed in midstream. Just like the craftsmen, those approaching the site must also combat the river; behind them, a procession of Assyrian soldiers and officials crosses a swirling torrent, while in front, Assyrian soldiers carefully wade through the dark.

While this image reveals much about the details of the making of a monument, what is most striking about the Balawat images is their depiction of an elaborate ritual procession, an activity identified not only in the scene's caption, but also confirmed in Shalmaneser III's annalistic texts (Grayson 1996, 27-32). In these texts, the king describes his actions, saying, "I washed the weapon of Ashur, made sacrifices to my gods, and gave a joyful feast." In fact, the performance of ritual seems to have been so important in the ninth century that even the Assyrian palace texts, which in other periods rarely discuss such details, make relatively frequent mention of these rituals.<sup>17</sup>

Although the text accounts are reticent in their description of details, this scene and others on the Balawat Gates reveal invaluable information about the facts of Assyrian ritual activity on the periphery,

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<sup>17</sup> For example, in Shalmaneser III's text on the Black Obelisk (Grayson 1996, 65-66).

including details on ritual paraphernalia and the participants. As is shown in the Balawat image of the Tigris source, an important event in the ritual procession was animal sacrifice, here specified as the slaughter of cows and rams. In the upper and lower friezes we see two ritual processions, one at the upper cave, and the other at the lower tunnel. It is possible, based on comparisons with Assyrian images, that these two scenes represent sequential moments in the same ritual. If so, in the lower scene we see the procession at an early stage when the entire entourage—with the sacrificial animals in tow—moves toward the royal monument. In contrast, in the upper scene we see a later moment, when the sacrifice itself is taking place. To carry this thought even further, in the Balawat Band I scene of Shalmaneser III's visit to the Nairi Sea (figure 5), we are shown yet another, even later, moment in the activity, when the sacrifice has already taken place and the remains are being thrown into the water. While these scenes are graphic in their representation of the ritual killing, we know little about the beliefs behind such activity in ancient Assyria.<sup>18</sup> These images do tell us, however, that animal sacrifice was just one step in a ritual series, and that it may have occurred early in the procession and in front of the monument image.

That proximity to the royal monument may have, in fact, been important to these rituals is suggested in the scene at the Nairi Sea (figure 5), where the arrangement of the ritual paraphernalia delineates a ritual precinct. Here, near the monument—presumably in front of it—stands an array of cultic furniture: military standards with tasseled disks, a three-legged tripod, a flaming incense burner, and a libation stand with vessel.<sup>19</sup> Placed at regular intervals to create a visual rhythm, these unusual objects, when encountered in the larger narrative reading of the band as a whole, slow the viewer's gaze, and in the process, recreate a sense of ritual distance and awe for the royal monument itself. Further emphasizing the close relationship between the monument and the ritual procession is the placement of the monument on elevated ground, so that its height is equal to that of the participants.

<sup>18</sup> For various discussions on this subject, see Quaegebeur 1993.

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the visual representation of ritual paraphernalia and ceremony, see Watanabe 1992.

In addition to the details of ritual paraphernalia, the Balawat scenes are also important for what they reveal about the identities of the ritual functionaries. While from both scenes it appears that Assyrian soldiers were given charge of the animal slaughter, other figures were part of the ritual procession as well. For example, in the depiction of the monuments at the Tigris source (figure 4), the soldiers at the front of the procession are followed by other figures, including several carrying bundles, one on horseback, and other members of the Assyrian military and administration. While the Tigris source scene depicts the ritual procession from a distance, however, the scene at the Nairi Sea (figure 5) focuses its perspective, so that the ritual functionaries take center stage. Here we see that in addition to the military personnel, the ritual procession also consisted of musicians, Assyrian officials, members of the priesthood, and the king himself. As such, the procession seems to have been a complex affair, involving several waves of activity.

While a full procession is depicted in both Balawat scenes, the climax of the events is fully developed in the Nairi scene only (figure 5), showing the moment when the Assyrian king himself reaches the head of the procession and, facing his own image, performs libations. In the process, it seems, the king sanctifies Assyria's new border, which, as is emphasized by the careful rendering of the mountainous landscape, is very literally carved from the land itself. In the process of ritually acknowledging his own image-as-border, the king foregrounds the role of his own divinely-sanctioned deeds and accomplishments. In so choosing to highlight this moment, Shalmaneser III characterizes what must have been, at least during the ninth century, the peripheral monument's defining significance, translating territorial gains into concrete form.

While the abovementioned texts and images are highly evocative of the importance of Assyrian ritual activity, they appear to have been limited to the ninth-century reigns of Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III. In addition, ritual appears to have been restricted to particular types of sites, especially those associated with mountains and waterways. In fact, during these reigns in particular, a relatively large number of monuments was erected in association with topographical features. One of the most frequently mentioned types of locations is said to have been a "river source," much like the Tigris source mentioned above. Whether these types of locations were considered to be more sacred

than others—as is suggested by the rituals associated with them—is uncertain. We do know, however, that frequently these locations were mentioned in conquest summaries, and as such, seem to have defined important cosmic extremities. In a related fashion, they may also have symbolized the king's far-reaching control of important natural resources and trade.

One imagines the water “source” to have been particularly symbolic of the king's ability to rechannel, so to speak, the benefits of Assyria's conquests, a theme also underlying accounts of booty and foreign tribute. In Shalmaneser III's account of his visit to the Tigris source, for example, he describes the monument site in a vivid manner, as being located “where the waters rush forth.” In creating such an image, not only does the king evoke the great force and abundance of the waters, but also his own perseverance and strength. As a powerful military leader, the king places his image where the river begins, and in the process, likens himself to the source of Assyria's abundance.

Much later than Shalmaneser III, we find this ninth-century tradition revived during the reign of Sennacherib, who, at the site of Khinnis, created his own version of this same phenomenon (Jacobsen and Lloyd 1935, 41-49). There he carved a total of at least eleven rock reliefs along the cliffs of the Gomel River. More to the point, however, these reliefs did more than simply mark the river; instead, they commemorated Sennacherib's construction of a canal head, whereby waters could be drawn to irrigate the fields. As such, the reliefs mark a new kind of water “source” that is the very creation of the king himself.

While the ninth-century examples emphasize the importance of ritual activity in remote locations, other evidence exists for Assyrian monuments in temples, where their exposure to ritual activity must have been more regular. In contrast to what we might hope for, few of the text accounts describe the actual erection of the monument in the temple, and in no case does a text describe the temple itself. Instead, those that do elaborate, simply emphasize the monument's proximity to the abovementioned “weapon of Ashur.” These texts imply that in addition to the monuments having a political message for the local populations, in urban contexts they also served as an important cultic focus for the visiting Assyrian populations as well.

Supplementing the texts, archaeological evidence addresses more specific issues of monument placement and function in temple



settings, although all of our evidence comes from Assyrian rather than foreign centers. This evidence reveals that, at least in some cases, the monuments occupied a central position in the temple interior and confirms that they were themselves important ritual objects. For example, our most securely contextualized monument is from the site of Tell el-Rimah, where the royal stela stood in the temple's inner cella, right next to the cult platform (Oates 1968, pl. 32a). There, oriented so that the king's gesture pointed directly toward the cult statue, the stela may have functioned as a votive offering to the deity, to stand in perpetual supplication for the king. An equally plausible interpretation is that because the king's image was visible to the temple visitor, it may have also received offerings itself.

Although not erected on Assyria's periphery, another example of a monument that may have functioned in the same manner is the Great Monolith of Ashurnasirpal II, discovered in the Ninurta Temple at Nimrud. Two factors suggest that the monument may have served as a cult object: its presumed original location in the temple, and the discovery of an "altar" at its base (Layard 1853, 302-304; Mallowan 1966, I: 87). As its inscription suggests, the monument may have been erected to be viewed and even read regularly by learned scholars, temple personnel, or other Assyrian officials. Furthermore, placed next to a doorway leading into the temple cella, the king's figure is oriented so that it points toward the cella, and therefore, much like the Rimah Stela, points toward the cult image itself. Perhaps in this case the location and orientation of the royal monument reveals notions of spatial movement and approach, so that the king's image would receive ritual attention first, as a precursor to the activities inside.

Despite what we learn from the above examples, it is important to remember that ritual activity associated with the monuments was not usually performed in formalized settings. Moreover, evidence suggests that some of the ritual activity was performed by subsequent rulers who revisited the sites, generation after generation.<sup>20</sup> We learn this from the peripheral monument texts themselves, which contain conclusions that directly address future visitors to the site, asking that the monument be treated with care. Addressing an unnamed viewer,

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Ashurnasirpal II's monument at the Subnat source (Grayson 1991, 200-201). The most dramatic example of royal Assyrian revisitation, however, is without question the site at the Nahr el-Kelb, where a total of six Assyrian reliefs were carved in the cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea (Weissbach 1922).

the text usually consists of two main parts: a blessing for those who treat the monument properly, and a curse against those who might wish to destroy it. Usually, the blessing asks that the monument be heeded in some way, by reading it and preserving its inscription. More striking, however, is its emphasis on the performance of ritual. In several cases the viewer is asked to perform rituals on the monument, including washing the monument with water (*mê.MEŠ liramik*), anointing it with oil (*šamna.MEŠ lipšuš*), and performing sacrifices (*niqâ liqqi*). While the exact purpose of the rituals is never made explicit, clearly they are meant to propitiate the deities in some way, since the consequences of the proper ritual activity are said to be divine recognition and favor.

Of course, in some important ways, the monument text conclusions describe a ritual activity similar in form and function to that represented much earlier on the Balawat Gates (figures 4, 5). On the one hand, they outline the specific activities such as ritual ablution and sacrifice. Equally important, however, is what these texts reveal about monument longevity. More specifically, as an analogue to the way the Balawat images show the monument's creation, the monument texts show the way that rituals effected a re-birth or renewal, when former kings' military accomplishments were both acknowledged and relived by future generations. Ideally, the visitor to the site—the agent for this renewal of tradition—would be an immediate dynastic successor. In this way, the monument would represent and effect communication from one king to another, thus directly invoking Assyrian tradition and legacy. In this process of continued communication, the Assyrian empire, which the monument helped delineate, would be viewed as perpetually reconstituted.

### *The Making of Imperial Space*

In the same way that the monument inscriptions reveal intended connections between successive generations of rulers, they also embody an important connection to the Assyrian palace center. More specifically, like the monument images, the monument texts—especially with their references to ritual blessings—have an important parallel in the Assyrian capitals. There, these same types of ritual prescriptions appear in building inscriptions or “foundation documents,” whose very

classification as such reveals their function as architectural markers. Written on tablets, cylinders, prisms and other objects, these inscriptions were systematically buried in structural foundations as a means to ensure a building's perpetuity, not only through their communication with future ruler-builders, but also through their very literal spatial function as a record of the building's form (Ellis 1968; Curtis and Reade 1995, 94-96). In the process of translating this text idiom from the center to the periphery, the Assyrians ensured a strong symbolic association between the empire's center and its borders. By extension, the peripheral ritual activities—including the making of the monument itself—might be understood as the activities necessary for the 'building' of the Assyrian imperial space.

While the notion that these monuments were very literally delineating Assyria's spatial footprint is convincing, there is yet another layer of discovery at hand. If we take a moment to examine the monument iconography further, we are able to shift our focus from a description of the monuments in a physical sense to a deeper understanding of how they were originally experienced. In general, because of the great gulf of time and space that separates us from the ancient world, we, as modern viewers, forget to envision the possible full range of a monument's meaning, especially as it relates to its contextual presence. In the case of the Assyrian monuments on the periphery, it appears that it was not the physical object itself that held intrinsic value, but rather, the power lay in its making and commemoration.

Further iconographical comparisons with several other Assyrian images provide a window onto how the peripheral monuments—and perhaps, by extension, Assyrian monuments in general—were viewed and experienced. First, as discussed above, the peripheral monument image clearly had direct connections with the stylized tree scene on orthostat B-23 (figure 3), not only in literal terms of its depiction of the king's figure, but also in its symbolic reiterative associations with abundance. With the B-23 connections in mind, another important image from Nimrud is the glazed brick panel from Fort Shalmaneser (figure 6) (Reade 1963; Mallowan 1966, II: fig. 373). Here, we see an enlightening reworking of some of the same elements found on orthostat B-23. For example, in the lower central part of the brick-panel image appear two mirror images of the Assyrian king dressed in a long fringed robe and pointing with the familiar raised right hand. Although this scene is highly reminiscent of that on B-23, there is a

significant difference. Here, there is no longer a stylized tree between the royal figures; instead, the tree has grown in size and appears in the area directly above. As such, the tree attains a new prominence in the overall composition and assumes a new form, so that its branches now envelope two symmetrical addorsed rampant bulls, emblems of the faunal wealth of the land, and by extension, of royal prowess.<sup>21</sup> In this process of iconographical transposition, what was in B-23 the object of the king's gesture—the tree—now in the brick panel transcends the royal scene as its framing member. Meanwhile, the king's reduplicated and now object-less image remains below as an echo of its former composition. Still making reference to its original location, the tree, in the process of its transposition, incorporates the two bulls, which, placed directly above the royal figures, occupy a parallel visual and metaphorical position.

Perhaps more than the internal cross-references within the upper and lower scenes themselves, the framing elements are what enrich the overall message of this visual map, indicating that the Assyrian king—now the object of his own gesture—is himself a manifestation of Assyria's divinely-bestowed abundance. More specifically, around the central tree scenes appear a series of five tree-shaped bands, which contain, among other elements, pomegranates and buds, and palmettes and caprids, and as such, represent the tree yet one additional step removed, in a more fully abstracted form.<sup>22</sup> Not only framing the central scenes but enveloping them, the abstracted tree-bands convey the notion that just like the rampant bulls, the tree also incorporates the Assyrian king within its branches, now not as its guardian, but as the very manifestation of the tree's eternal abundance.

The brick-panel scene thus constitutes a variation on the elements that comprise the orthostat B-23 scene, showing more explicitly that the tree and king represent nearly interchangeable parts. These metaphorical associations are mapped not simply through one reconfiguration,

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<sup>21</sup> The stylized tree was usually flanked by either animal, human, or supernatural figures. The animals, by definition, seem to have connoted reproductive potential and perhaps instinct. The bull in particular, however, was associated directly with the king (Parpola 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Moreover, these abstracted bands contain elements that would never be seen on one single stylized tree alone; instead, they seem to represent an array of types. Such a combination of tree elements seems to be the result of the tree's long history (Parpola 1993), and I would argue that the tree's longevity serves as a metaphor for the king's desire to engage dynastic continuity and thus legitimacy.

but through two, until what was once the object of the king's gesture becomes the divine canopy that frames and protects his rule. Now our reading of the peripheral monument image (figures 1, 2) also becomes more complex. In particular, especially as we look to the Fort Shalmaneser brick panel, we begin to understand the importance of the peripheral monument's raised frame. It is the raised frame that assumes perhaps the most important visual role in the entire image, not just because it contains the image, but because it is the mechanism by which the image is recast, taking elements from several different monument types and recombining them. Therefore, the peripheral monument frame acts much like the brick-panel's abstracted outer tree-bands, especially its outermost plain band. Not only is it a mechanism for image reconfiguration, but it also serves—as a reference to the tree—to emphasize the king as a manifestation of Assyria's divine abundance.

When we return to orthostat B-23, we now notice a metaphorical connection between the figure of the king and the figure of the sacred tree. It is perhaps easy to overlook the implications of the fact that the image on B-23 was located in Ashurnasirpal II's throneroom directly behind the Assyrian king's throne (Meuszynski 1981, pl. 1, plan 3). There, when the king assumed his position to receive visitors, his person visually merged with the tree behind, revealing the metaphorical parallels between king and tree, and thus the king's contribution to the tree's abundance. Moreover, with the king in this position, the outer edges of the tree behind would have appeared to both emanate from and envelope the king, functioning as a symbolically eloquent canopy or frame for his royal person.

With this moment of visual sophistication in mind, it is helpful to remember that palace iconography functioned on yet another, spatial level as well. Irene Winter (1983) has discovered how the imagery of orthostat B-23 served the crucial role of orienting the visitor's approach and movement through the throneroom. In her reconstruction and analysis of the throneroom reliefs, Winter was able to suggest that the throneroom stood as a microcosmic representation of the real territorial state of Assyria. Moreover, she demonstrated how the tree scene stood not only as the focal point of the room and culmination of the surrounding narratives, but also that another version of the scene—located directly opposite the throneroom entrance—oriented and guided the palace visitors physically and psychologically toward

the king. In addition, other reduplicated stylized trees were carved in the corners of throneroom, thus delineating and anchoring the four corners of this microcosmic realm. As for the relationship between these images and the real-time experience of the space, we unfortunately have no evidence. What Winter has convincingly argued, however, is that the images were arranged in a deliberate way to direct movement and to affect the viewer's experience.

With this visual organization in place, it must have been the moment of the king's presence that forged the ultimate symbolic connection between the microcosm of the palace and the macrocosm of the Assyrian territorial state. In other words, it must have been the real-life occupancy of the space that made the monuments and their message come alive. Indeed, it certainly was spectacular to witness the king in direct relationship with his own image, for this was the moment the king appeared simultaneously as the creator and the created. This dual role is, once again, suggested by the Fort Shalmaneser brick panel (figure 6). There, as the tree becomes abstracted and widens to become the image frame, the two identical royal figures remain, now standing in a mirror-image, reflexive-action stance, thus acknowledging simultaneously the other and themselves. Returning to B-23 (figure 3), we can imagine that a similar transformation must have taken place, but only when the king himself was present. Then, seated on his throne in front of the tree, the king became the object of creation as the two royal figures behind must have seemed to gesture toward him. In taking his seat upon the throne, therefore, the king asserted himself as both the creator of his own images, and also, as the ultimate created object himself.

Likewise, the images on the Balawat gates reinforce this assertion that originally, it was the ritual presence of the king that gave the peripheral monument power. As Band I reveals (figure 5), it was the king's gesture before his own image that must have been the most spectacular moment of all. Here, at the slow culmination of an elaborate procession, the king stands in a reflexive moment before his own image. He acknowledges much more than simply an abstracted version of the sacred tree; rather, he honors the very moment when the tree and the king are both transformed and materialized. Most important, this is the moment when the king is no longer oriented toward something outside of himself, but is himself fully realized and acknowledged as both leader and creator.



In this sense more than any other, this moment of royal ritual was the moment when the Assyrian peripheral monument carried its fullest meaning. It was the moment when the king's central role in Assyria's growth and abundance very literally transformed a landscape into the realm called Assyria. It was the moment, therefore, when the king and the land, when the idea and its materialization, became one.

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Figure 1. Kurkh stela of Shalmaneser III (British Museum; © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum)



Figure 2. Rock relief of Esarhaddon at Nahr el-Kelb, Lebanon (after Weissbach, 1922, pl. XI)





Figure 3. Slab B-23, Northwest Palace, Nimrud (British Museum; © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum)

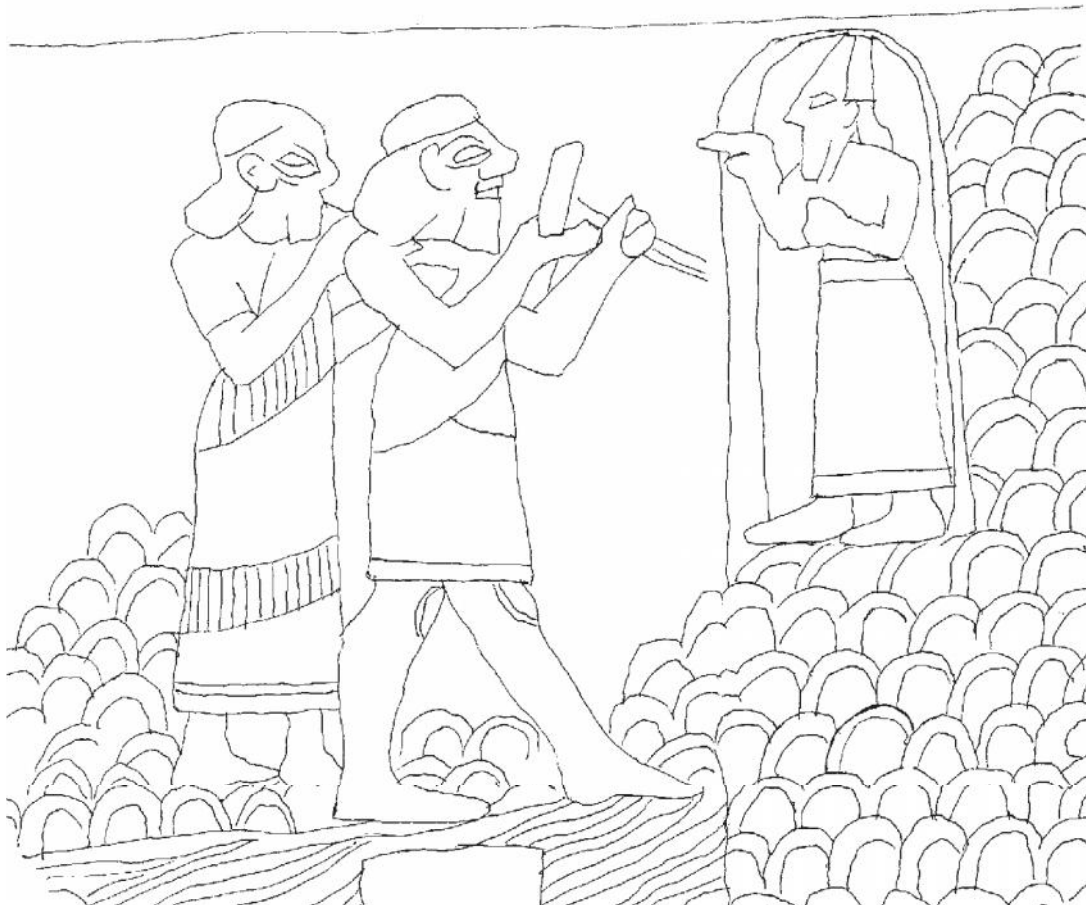


Figure 4. Line drawing of Balawat Gates, Band X





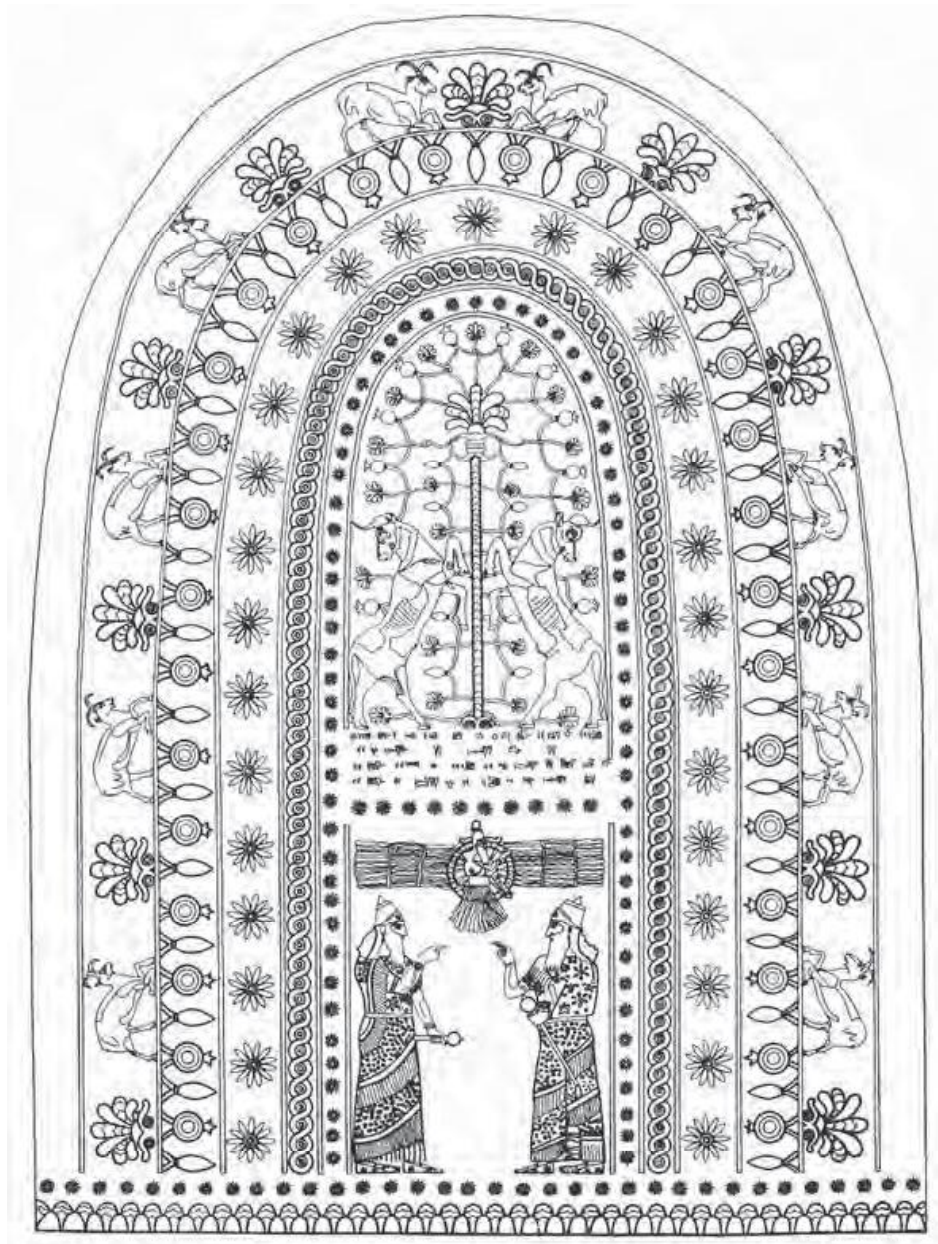


Figure 6. Reconstruction drawing of glazed brick panel above the south doorway of Fort Shalmaneser Room T3 (after Oates and Oates 2001, 183: fig. 112; courtesy of Julian Reade)